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# On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response

Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch

I. A. Richards has said that we begin reading any text with an implicit faith in its coherence, an assumption that its author intended to convey some meaning and made the choices most likely to convey the meaning effectively.<sup>1</sup> As readers, therefore, we tolerate the writer's manipulation of the way we see the subject that is being addressed. Our tolerance derives from a tacit acceptance of the writer's "authority" to make the statements we are reading.<sup>2</sup> When reading a textbook, for instance, we assume that its writer knows at least as much about the book's subject as we do, and ideally even more. When we read a newspaper article, we take for granted that the writer has collected all the relevant facts and presented them honestly. In either case, "authority" derives partly from what we know about the writer (for instance, professional credentials or public recognition) and partly from what we see in the writer's discourse (the probity of its reasoning, the skill of its construction, its use of references that we may recognize). The sources of writers' authority may be quite various. But whatever the reason for our granting authority, what we are conceding is the author's right to make statements in exactly the way they are made in order to say exactly what the writer wishes to say.

The more we know about a writer's skill, the more we have read of that individual's work or heard of his or her reputation, the greater the claim to authority. This claim can be so powerful that we will tolerate writing from that author which appears to be unusually difficult, even obscure or downright confusing. For instance, our having read Dylan Thomas' *Fern Hill* with pleasure may lead us to work harder at reading *Altarwise by Owlright*, although we may not understand it readily and may not derive the same pleasure from reading it. As readers, we see this harder material as a problem of interpretation, not a shortcoming of the composer. Writers may, of course, compromise their authority through evident or repeated lapses, but, in general,

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readers will assume that problematic texts demand greater effort from them, not rewriting from the author. Writers in fact depend on readers' willingness to stay with a text, even a difficult one, without judging it prematurely on the basis of its apparent violation of their own perspectives or impressions of some subject. The incentive to write derives from an assumption that people will listen respectfully and either assent to or earnestly consider the ideas expressed. And ordinarily readers will make an honest effort to understand a writer's text provided that its ideas matter to them and provided that the writer's authority is sufficient to compel their attention.<sup>3</sup>

When we consider how writing is taught, however, this normal and dynamic connection between a writer's authority and the quality of a reader's attention is altered because of the peculiar relationship between teacher and student. The teacher-reader assumes, often correctly, that student writers have not yet earned the authority that ordinarily compels readers to listen seriously to what writers have to say. Indeed, teachers view themselves as the authorities, intellectually maturer, rhetorically more experienced, technically more expert than their apprentice writers. Oddly, therefore, in classroom writing situations, the reader assumes primary control of the choices that writers make, feeling perfectly free to "correct" those choices any time an apprentice deviates from the teacher-reader's conception of what the developing text "ought" to look like or "ought" to be doing.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the teacher more often than the student determines what the writing will be about, the form it will take, and the criteria that will determine its success. Student writers, then, are put into the awkward position of having to accommodate, not only the personal intentions that guide their choice-making, but also the teacher-reader's expectations about how the assignment should be completed. The teacher's role, it is supposed, is to tell the writers how to do a better job than they could do alone, thereby in effect appropriating the writers' texts. In reading those texts and commenting on them, the teacher-evaluator "fixes" the writing in ways that appear to approximate the Platonic Discourse, the Ultimate Propriety, that any given student text may have suggested but not achieved. Of course, that Platonic Discourse exists only in the teacher's mind (where it often resides secretly as a guide to judging) and may have little to do with what individual writers initially tried to accomplish.

When teachers appropriate their students' texts, they do so with what appear to be the best of motives. By making elaborate corrections on student writing, teachers appear to be showing the discrepancy between what the writing has actually achieved and what ideal writing ought to look like, perhaps with the conviction that any student who perceives the difference can also narrow it. But this correcting also tends to show students that the teacher's agenda is more important than their own, that what they wanted to say is less relevant than the teacher's impression of what they should have said. The writer wants to talk about how she got her first job while the teacher wants an exercise in comparison and contrast. Once students perceive

this shift of agenda, their motives for writing also shift: the task is now to match the writing to expectations that lie beyond their own sense of their intention and method. Therefore, far from controlling the responses of an intended reader, they are forced to concede the reader's authority and to make guesses about what they can and cannot say. One consequence is often a diminishing of students' commitment to communicate ideas that they value and even a diminishing of the incentive to write.

We are not suggesting that students texts are, in fact, authoritative. But we do argue that incentive is vital to improvement and also that it is linked crucially to the belief that one's writing will be read earnestly. Since teachers do not grant student writers the authority that ordinarily justifies serious reading, they tend to undervalue student efforts to communicate what they have to say in the way they wish to say it. Yet it is precisely the chance to accomplish one's own purposes by controlling one's own choices that creates incentive to write. Denying students control of what they want to say must surely reduce incentive and also, presumably, the likelihood of improvement. Regardless of what we may know about students' authority, therefore, we lose more than we gain by preempting their control and allowing our own Ideal Texts to dictate choices that properly belong to the writers.

When we pay more attention to our Ideal Texts than to the writers' purposes and choices, we compromise both our ability to help students say effectively what they truly want to say and our ability to recognize legitimately diverse ways of saying it. Teaching from the vantage point of the Ideal Text is paternalistic: the teacher "knows best," knows what the writer should do and how it should be done, and feels protective because his or her competence is superior to that of the writer. This paternalism is sometimes liberal and sometimes conservative. The conservative teacher is prone to underestimate the writer's competence, using the Ideal Text to measure degrees of failure. Conversely, the liberal teacher is prone to exaggerate the writer's competence, assuming that, although the writer has not matched the Ideal Text, some quality in the writing nonetheless excuses the lapse. For instance, a teacher might sympathize with a student's sincerity or effort despite misgivings about perceived errors. The trouble with both types of paternalism is the teachers' assumption that they always and necessarily know what writers mean to say and are therefore always reliable judges of how well writers actually say it. There is little suspicion that the Ideal Text may simply be irrelevant in terms of what a writer attempted to do. Hence, teachers are distracted from offering the best kind of assistance—that is, helping writers achieve their own purposes—while insisting on ideas, strategies, or formal constraints that are often not pertinent to a writer's own goals.

An example from our recent research demonstrates the extent to which adherence to an Ideal Text interferes with the ability to read student writing in ways that can best help writers to achieve their goals. We asked students to write an essay on the Lindbergh kidnapping trial, stating a purpose and an

intended audience.<sup>5</sup> One student, John, decided to write out a version of the prosecution's closing oral argument. Here is an excerpt:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I whole-heartedly believe that the evidence which has been presented before you has clearly shown that the man who is on trial here today is beyond a doubt guilty of murder of the darling little, innocent Lindbergh baby.

Sure, the defendant has stated his innocence. But who are we to believe? Do we believe the testimony of a man who has been previously convicted; in fact convicted to holding up innocent women wheeling baby carriages? Or do we believe the testimony of one of our nation's greatest heroes, Charles A. Lindbergh. Mr. Lindbergh believes the defendant is guilty. So do I.

All I ask, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is that you look at the evidence. First we have the evidence that the defendant suddenly became \$44,486 richer since April 2. Is it only a coincidence that the ransom was paid the same night?

Don't forget the testimony of Mr. Whited and Mr. Rossitor both of whom said they saw the accused on or around Feb. 27 in New Jersey even though the accused lives in the Bronx. The kidnapping occurred on March 1.

We asked forty teachers to assess the quality of this writing in light of what the writer was trying to do. They all responded in one of two ways, neither of which recognized the writer's control over choices. One group, the conservatives, felt that John was taking on the persona of the prosecuting attorney seriously addressing the jury at the time of the trial. However, this group concluded that John's argument was not convincing because of his blatant use of emotional appeal. These readers felt that no self-respecting member of the jury would be convinced by such sentimentalized language as "darling little, innocent Lindbergh baby." According to them, John tended to depend too much on emotions and too little on logic. The second group, the liberals, concluded, on the contrary, that John had adopted the persona of a "mock" attorney and that his writing was intentionally satirical. They too pointed to the use of emotional language but saw it as consistent with a satiric purpose. Each group, in other words, referred to exactly the same textual evidence to bolster its argument, even though the two arguments were diametrically opposed.

In both cases, the teachers were reading John's text from the perspective of their own shared Ideal Text, one in which straightforward logic, freed from patronizing emotional appeal, was sufficient for persuasion. The conservative group denied John the possibility this his writing could have been competent because they measured the limits of competence with reference to a model that ruled out John's overtly emotional appeal. The liberal teachers accepted precisely the same Ideal Text, but they credited John with more, rather than less, sophistication. They assumed that John must surely be writing satire because he could not possibly mean what he appeared to be saying on the page. Hence they granted him a competence that he may not have had

while ignoring the competence that he actually manifested in his essay. Both groups were surprised when we showed them the actual transcript of the prosecution's summation in Hauptmann's trial. They discovered that its strategy and language were in fact very similar to those in John's essay:

Why, men and women, if that little baby, if that little, curly-haired youngster were out in the grass in the jungle, breathing, just so long as it was breathing, any tiger, any lion, the most venomous snake would have passed that child without hurting a hair of its head.

The point is not that John's choice of language, or even the original prosecutor's choice, was "right" in some absolute sense. Rather, John's choice was simply not wrong; yet the teachers' Ideal Text interfered with their acceptance of John's perfectly plausible option.

What this example suggests is the value of consulting a student writer about what he or she wanted to say before suggesting how he or she ought to say it. In other words, it shows why we ought to relinquish our control of student writing and return it to the writers: doing so will not only improve student incentive to write, but will also make our responses to the writing more pertinent. But how and to what extent can we relinquish control? The question is attitudinal more than methodological. Teachers need to alter their traditional emphasis on a relationship between student texts and their own Ideal Text in favor of the relationship between what the writer meant to say and what the discourse actually manifests of that intention. This shift entails our recognizing that even inexperienced writers operate with a sense of logic and purpose that may not appear on the page but that nonetheless guides their choices.<sup>6</sup> We must replace our professional but still idiosyncratic models of how writing ought to appear, and put in their place a less authoritarian concern for how student texts make us respond as readers and whether those responses are congruent with the writers' intentions or not. The focus then will be, not on the distance between text and some teacher's personal notion of its most ideal version, but rather on the disparity between what the writer wanted to communicate and what the choices residing in the text actually cause readers to understand. Necessarily, the emphasis on form that mainly preoccupies us when we think in terms of an ideal model will change to an emphasis on the writer's ideas and communicative goals. And this changed emphasis will allow the writer to sense both a real control over the discourse and also the reader's real interest in what is being said. The consequence can be a reinforcement of the writer's incentive to keep writing and therefore an enriched environment in which to improve skills.

This change in teacher attitude and teacher-student relationship does, of course, demand some changes in pedagogy. Because students are largely unaccustomed to having their writing taken seriously, teachers may well have to dramatize the transfer of control they wish their students to perceive. Single-draft writing assignments, for instance, do not allow writers to assert

control because they offer only one chance to write. Students, therefore, must accept a teacher's pronouncements without the opportunity to reassert their points of view or to explain what they were trying to do. Multiple-draft assignments, on the other hand, provide an opportunity for dialogue about how effectively the writer's choices have enabled the communication of intentions. Multiple-draft assignments also place emphasis on revision, on the progressively more complete achievement of communicative effect, so that what might be regarded as "errors" on a single-draft assignment may be seen as opportunities to clarify or refine relationships between intention and effect. By focusing on error, the teacher is the authority, a judge of the writing. But if revision is the focus, the writer retains control, assuming responsibility to create a discourse that conveys intended meanings in a way that enables a reader to perceive them.

It is not sufficient, however, simply to have students rewrite their statements. The way we talk to them about their successive drafts is just as important as offering them a chance to revise.<sup>7</sup> It would be easy to point out errors, just as on single-draft assignments, and to require copyediting on the next draft. But the concern is not merely to ask for editing in order to make discourse look superficially better; rather, it is to work with the writer in examining the effectiveness of some intended communication and to initiate improvement where possible. Nor is the concern merely to test the writer's ability to follow directions in order to approximate the teacher-evaluator's Ideal Text. Instead, it is to pursue writers' real intentions until they are satisfactorily conveyed. In other words, the teacher's proper role is not to tell the student explicitly what to do but rather to serve as a sounding-board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered. The teacher's role is to attract a writer's attention to the relationship between intention and effect, enabling a recognition of discrepancies between them, even suggesting ways to eliminate the discrepancies, but finally leaving decisions about alternative choices to the writer, not the teacher.

At the start, students and teachers need to share their different perceptions as makers and readers of a discourse. Writers know what they *intended* to communicate. Readers know what a text has *actually* said to them. If writers and readers can exchange information about intention and effect, they can negotiate ways to bring actual effect as closely in line with a desired intention as possible. Answering some general questions can help in the sharing of this information. If both teachers and students answer the questions separately, and then compare their answers, the differences in their answers can generate discussion and elicit other, more specific questions leading toward revision. The general questions include "What did the writer intend to do?" "What has the writing actually said?" and "How has the writing done what it is supposed to do?" The first one concerns the anticipated effect of a discourse; the second concerns its literal statements; and the third pertains to the writer's and

reader's estimate of how or in what way the content, shape, and sequence of those statements achieve the desired effect. In the case of John's essay, a portion of which appeared earlier, an answer to the first question might be "the writing should show that the prosecution is convinced of Hauptmann's guilt." An answer to the second question might be, "the writing says that Hauptmann had a previous criminal record, etc." and an answer to the third question might be, "the use of sentimental language in describing the Lindbergh baby works on the jury's emotions and makes them unsympathetic to Hauptmann."

We can ask and answer the questions using several different teaching formats, including one-to-one conferences, peer-group collaborations, and even certain kinds of comments on student essays. Again, attitudes are more important than methods. The questions initiate a process of negotiation, where writer and peers or writer and teacher (or tutor) work together to consider, and if possible to enhance, the relationship between intention and effect. First, do the writer's and the teacher's responses agree or differ? If they differ, what evidence does each reader have to support the reading? Answering this question will lead both teacher and student into the text in order to discuss the reasons for variant perceptions. If the responses agree, does every part of the text contribute helpfully to sustaining the writer's intentions? And, finally, do the parts need clarifying or elaborating in order to improve their effectiveness? The teacher's principal concern in asking and cooperatively answering these questions is to make the writer think about what has been said, not to tell the writer what to do. The point is to return control of choice-making as soon as possible to the writer, while also creating a motive for making changes. Negotiation assumes, of course, that neither teacher nor writer stays relentlessly with an initial position. The teacher resists the temptation to say, "Do it this way," which reduces the writer's role to a trivial one of following directions. Meanwhile, the student, faced with the reality of a reader's misunderstanding, can no longer say, "But what I really meant was . . ." Of course, the process of negotiation does not move the writing toward the teacher's Ideal Text; in fact, it does not even guarantee a more successful next draft. But what it does is to force the writer to reassert control and thereby gain experience in revising. Since the impulse to revise arises out of a sense of not having fully communicated some intended message, the rewriting is not merely formulaic but is, in fact, inventive, a reconstituting of the meanings that the writer is concerned to convey.

Ideally, readers should respond to writers face to face. But to the extent that this is inconvenient, there is a way for teachers to simulate the conference model without having the student actually present. Students may compose drafts in which they also write out their intentions in a large column to the right of the text itself. After composing, the writers go back through their drafts and explain, paragraph by paragraph, what they were trying to say or do and how they expected the reader to react to it. Students will improve as



estimators of their own intentions as they practice writing them out; but it is important to add that teachers remain free to raise questions about intentions that the writers may not have explained in the margin. Especially in the beginning, teachers may need to encourage their students to estimate intent at as many points in the draft as they can, sometimes even sentence by sentence, because, the more commentary the writers can provide, the more certain the teacher is about what the writers want to do and the more help the teacher can offer in doing it effectively.

Notice how John describes his intentions on the first draft of his simulated address to the jury:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I whole-heartedly believe that the evidence which has been presented before you has clearly shown that the man who is on trial here today is beyond a doubt guilty of murder of the darling little, innocent Lindbergh baby.

Sure, the defendant has stated his innocence. But, who are we to believe? Do we believe testimony of a man who has been previously convicted; in fact convicted of holding up innocent women wheeling baby carriages? Or do we believe the testimony of one of our nation's greatest heroes, Charles A. Lindbergh. Mr. Lindbergh believes the defendant is guilty. So do I.

All I ask, ladies and gentlemen of the jury is that you look at the evidence. First we have the evidence that the defendant suddenly became \$44,486 richer since April 2. Is it only a coincidence that the ransom was paid the same night?

Don't forget the testimony of Mr. Whited and Mr. Rossiter both of whom said they saw the accused on or around Feb. 27 in New Jersey even though the accused lives in the Bronx. The kidnapping occurred on Mar. 1.

Informal, putting the jury at ease.

Telling my (prosecution's) belief of guilt confidently.

Touching at human spirit.

Showing the *negative* side of defendant and connecting his past with similarity of crime he is accused of now.

Showing the *integrity* of the father of the victim of the murder. Overall a very *biased* view.

List of evidence, all against accused. Not too much detail is given, but if I leave the jury with a series of factual pieces of evidence against the defendant, the jury will say to themselves, "Wow, there is so much going against him, he's guilty."

Potentially, a comparison of John's stated intentions and the actual effects of the writing might give rise to various points of negotiation. Consider the third and fourth paragraphs. Although John has indicated what he wanted to accomplish ("List of evidence, all against accused. Not too much detail is given"), he may not yet have done what he thinks he has done ("if I leave the

jury with a series of factual pieces of evidence against the defendant, the jury will say to themselves, 'Wow, there is so much going against him, he's guilty.'"). The teacher (or peer or tutor) might raise questions here ("Did the defense counter any of this testimony and thereby discredit it? If so, would the jury be convinced by John's listing of 'facts'?"). John's teacher did raise these questions, and John's response to them demonstrated his control of the writing. He agreed that his first idea, that all he needed to do was list the facts, would not create the effect that he desired. Later he extensively re-wrote this portion of the text, noting the defense's inability to counter convincingly each piece of evidence submitted by the prosecution. The result of the dialogue between John and his teacher was to give John a chance to re-examine his initial choices and come up with a new strategy for creating the impact he wished to have on the jury. John remained in control of the choices, although it took the questions of a reader to help him see that he had not yet done what he thought he had done.

It may be that other teaching strategies beyond those suggested here work equally to promote the transfer of responsibility from teacher to student that we have been advocating. Our concern has been only secondarily to show how it can be done, and primarily to argue that it should be done. Although student texts are not, in fact, authoritative, we must nonetheless accept a student writer's authority to the extent that we grant the writer control over the process of making choices: that is, we tentatively acknowledge the composer's right to make statements in the way they are made in order to say what he or she intended to say. Often, to be sure, we will see deficiencies in the resulting discourse, but if we preempt the writer's control by ignoring intended meanings in favor of formal and technical flaws, we also remove the incentive to write and the motivation to improve skills. Conversely, granting students control of their own writing can create a rich ground for nurturing skills because the writer's motive for developing them lies in the realization that an intended reader is willing to take the writer's meaning seriously. If the writer is allowed to have something to say, then the saying of it is more likely to matter. The methods we have described allow the teacher to return control of a discourse to the writer as soon as possible by encouraging multiple drafts, each stimulated by the responses of a reader. Subsequent drafts are not always closer to a teacher's sense of formal, technical, or intellectual propriety, but they invariably show writers responding to the issues raised in their own texts, attempting to close perceived gaps between what was intended and what earlier drafts actually said. As these gaps are successfully narrowed, one draft at a time, the motive to solve technical problems is strengthened, in a context in which the writer's intentions matter more than teachers' Ideal Texts.

Eventually, of course, teachers judge student writing, and they invoke standards in the process. Preferably, in multiple-draft assignments, evaluation occurs only (1) after writers have had the opportunity to receive peer and

teacher responses to their writing; (2) after they have had a chance to revise as they wish; and (3) after they have decided that their writing is finished and ready to be evaluated. And when evaluation is undertaken, as a last step in the process we propose, the standards invoked do not have to do with fixed preconceptions about form or content as stipulated by some Ideal Text. Instead, they relate to communicative effectiveness as an experienced reader assesses it in a particular writing situation. The standards of communicative effectiveness are how well the writer's choices achieve stated or implied purposes given the needs and expectations of an intended audience. If the evaluator finds the writer's choices to be *plausible* (as opposed to "correct") all of the time, the grade for that writing is higher than if the choices occasionally or frequently create uncertainties that cause failures in communication.

Evaluation, then, is the natural conclusion of the process of response and negotiation, carried through successive drafts. By responding, a teacher creates incentive in the writer to make meaningful changes. By negotiating those changes rather than dictating them, the teacher returns control of the writing to the student. And by evaluating, the teacher gives the student writer an estimate of how well the teacher thinks the student's revisions have brought actual effects into line with stated intentions. By looking first to those intentions, both in responding and in evaluating, we show students that we take their writing seriously and that we assume that they are responsible for communicating what they wish to say. The sense of genuine responsibility kindled in inexperienced writers can be a powerful first step in the development of mature competence.

## Notes

1. See I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), especially Part III, *passim*.
2. The concept of authority or *ethos* is, of course, an ancient one. For definition and elaboration see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1356a2).
3. Reader-response criticism, as practiced by Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Georges Poulet, and others, considers these issues in extensive scholarly detail. For a survey of this work, see *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).
4. For the prevalence of this style of commenting and some arguments about its insufficiency, see C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, "Teacher Commentary on Student Writing: The State of the Art," *Freshman English News*, 10 (Fall, 1981), 1-4. See also Dennis Searle and David Dillon, "The Message of Marking: Teacher Written Responses to Student Writing at Intermediate Grade Levels," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 14 (October, 1980), 233-42.
5. We adapted this exercise from W. Edgar Moore, Instructor's Manual to *Creative and Critical Thinking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).
6. For development of this assumption see David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (October, 1980), 253-69.
7. Nancy Sommers has noted the radical unfamiliarity of unskilled writers with revision strategies that experienced writers take for granted. See Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," *College Composition and Communication*, 31 (December, 1980), 378-88.